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April 1, 2018

Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
Easter Sunday, Year B Mark 16:1-8

This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it! Amen

This is my husband's and my third year in Central Montana. One of the unexpected things we have learned to live with is that spring is a long time in coming here. Our friends back in Western Washington are enjoying their daffodils in full bloom. The Skagit Valley will be ready with fields of tulips just in time for their festival in mid-April. In Northern California my mother reports buds and new leaves on the trees and the lawns will be ready for their first mowing very soon.

But we aren't quite ready for all that here. Some early hyacinths have started to show, but the weather we had this weekend would make most visitors question the usual signs of spring.

That's a bit what our gospel reading from Mark feels like today. This Easter story is not what we expect. Mark's is the only gospel where Jesus does not appear after his resurrection. Today's reading is the end of the story for Mark, and we are left with the image of three terrified women running from the tomb.

They thought the time of following Jesus was over. They came to the tomb for one final act of caring, to anoint his body with spices. They might have come earlier, but they couldn't because of the restrictions of the Sabbath. So on the third day after they watched him die, they prepared to say goodbye once and for all. That part sounds about right.

And like the other Easter accounts his body is not there. What's different is that the risen Jesus does not appear anywhere near the tomb and Mark does not tell about all those other appearances that Peter and Paul describe in our other readings. There is only a young man, dressed in white, who tells them that once again, Jesus has gone on ahead of them and they must follow him to Galilee.

But Galilee isn't going ahead. Galilee is going back...back to where they started. Galilee for these women means going home.

You know that old adage, "You can't go home again?" For some of you that's not necessarily true. Many of the people I've met here have told me they have lived here "all their lives" — except for some time away, a time at college, or a time of travel and exploring the world, a time spent finding out who they are and what's important to them.

The time away was a season to learn and grow, and then one day they knew it was time to come home.

Maybe that's what it felt like for those women at the tomb. That three year season with Jesus, of traveling with him and caring for him, listening to him and watching how others treated him was a season when they came to believe that truly this man was the Son of God. It was a season of learning not only who they were in their own eyes, it was a time to learn

who they were through the eyes of Jesus—through the eyes of God—beloved children who were capable of more than they ever imagined.

Jesus had challenged his followers to see people as God saw them. Even if the world saw them as worthless, Jesus saw each person as valuable and precious. Jesus believed in his disciples as he sent them out into the world to do great things, to preach and teach in his name.

Jesus had taught them to see the promise and potential that God could do in a world ruled by brokenness and despair.

It was in Galilee that these women and the other disciples had witnessed Jesus bringing about resurrection all along—feeding the hungry, driving out demons, preaching hope to the brokenhearted, healing those in distress, and breaking down barriers that separated people. On that first Easter Sunday, Jesus' instructions are calling his disciples to continue the work of resurrection that he started.

For the women at the tomb going back to Galilee with the other disciples did not mean that everything would be as it was before. It couldn't be because they were not the same people as they were when they left. They had something new to offer their friends and family—a new kind of compassion, hope, and the promise that new life was possible even in a world where death seems to have the last word.

Mark's account of that first Easter morning is unsettling—especially the ending. We don't like to associate terror with Easter. This morning our worship is filled with our proclamation that Christ has risen! He has risen indeed! But these women were filled with fear and said nothing...at least not right away.

Every transition in life has some fear mixed in with our hopeful anticipation of what is to come. Leaving home for the first time to go out into the world is as scary as it is exciting.

And then we face the challenges of life—changing jobs, getting married, becoming parents or learning that won't be possible, experiencing a death or divorce or any number of other losses—all of these are events in which we learn more about ourselves, what we are capable of, and what is important to us.

Mark's challenge for us today is to notice that with the fear that comes with these times of change there is also amazement—amazement at the way God accompanies us through this life, amazement at the ways the Holy Spirit literally lifts our spirits to endure as the world throws one challenge after another at us, amazement at the things we have learned and the ways we have grown.

Maybe today you feel like you are at one of those crossroads in life. Until we take our last breath we will continue to face those transitions that take us into a new season, each mixed with fear and amazement. Today, let us hear the words of the young man in the tomb as if they are spoken for us.

“Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus. He has been raised! Go, tell the others that he is going ahead of you.”

We are not *all* called to go back to the homes of our childhoods, but perhaps today God is calling you to go back to where you first met Jesus.

Go back to the Bible to hear the stories of God and God’s people again, now that you are in a new place in your life. Go back to worshiping more regularly, to hear more often the good news that Jesus is not dead, but is alive and active in a world that needs believers like you to be the messengers of God’s grace. Go back to living with Jesus as your guide as you face each new season in your life, trusting that he goes ahead of you.

Spring is coming! Christ is risen and goes ahead of us, bringing us to the places where we can encounter the love of God and where we have God’s work to do—a word to speak, an act of caring to give, the gifts and talents God has developed in us to share with others. All of which is both frightening and amazing!

The good news is that we don’t travel alone. We have each other, fellow believers, and Jesus is there ahead of us to meet us, ready to welcome us home.

Thanks be God! Amen